

## Bill backs cancer shot for girls

**Vaccine called lifesaver; critics see a bad message.**

**By Jim Sanders - Bee Capitol Bureau**

***Published 12:00 am PST Friday, December 8, 2006***

California lawmakers are considering whether to require young girls to be vaccinated against a virus spread almost exclusively through sex -- but which can be deadly.

A new legislative proposal would create the state's only immunization requirement targeting a single gender -- girls -- and the only one aimed at a virus contracted solely by genital contact.

Assemblywoman Sally Lieber's measure, Assembly Bill 16, would require girls to be vaccinated against the human papilloma virus (HPV) as a condition of entering the sixth grade in public or private schools after July 1, 2008.

"For the first time, there is a vaccine that can prevent a particular form of cancer -- and we want to take advantage of that," said Lieber, D-Mountain View.

Dr. Len Fromer, past president of the California Academy of Family Physicians, said his aunt's life could have been saved if such a vaccine had been available years ago.

"Any policy that improves the likelihood that people who should get the vaccination do get the vaccination is a good thing," he said.

But critics worry about the possibility of sending a mixed message, with parents urging girls not to have sex and AB 16 requiring them to be immunized against a risk that exists only if they do.

"What kind of a message is it to tell a young girl that she needs a shot because you expect her to have sex before she's 15?" asked Randy Thomasson, president of the Campaign for Children and Families, a lobbying group on social issues.

Gardasil, a product recently approved by the federal government, targets four strains of HPV that cause about 70 percent of cervical cancer and about 90 percent of genital warts.

Cervical cancer is the second-leading cause of death among women worldwide. About 3,700 women die in the United States each year from the disease, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

AB 16 would add HPV vaccine to the state's immunization requirements, which target measles, mumps, polio, tetanus, rubella, whooping cough, diphtheria, hepatitis B, chicken pox and haemophilus influenza type B.

California law gives parents the right to veto any vaccination for their child by filing a letter with school officials stating that participation would violate their beliefs.

For HPV vaccination, Thomasson said, parents should be required to give specific permission -- opt-in rather than opt-out.

"The best way to know that mom or dad permits this is to have a signature," he said.

Lieber's measure does not propose appropriating state funds, so the cost of mandatory HPV vaccinations -- more than \$360 for a three-shot regimen -- would fall on parents, insurance firms or federal subsidies for low-income families.

Kaiser, Aetna and Blue Shield are among health-insurance providers that cover Gardasil vaccinations.

More than 100 health plans currently cover the vaccine, representing 94 percent of privately insured individuals nationwide, said Kelley Dougherty, a Gardasil spokeswoman.

Michigan lawmakers are considering a similar vaccination requirement.

Thomasson called AB 16 well-intentioned but said it would be a Band-Aid, at best.

Promiscuity can lead to numerous diseases, not just HPV, and vaccinations could provide a false sense of security, he said.

"This has a high chance of sending the message to girls that you can have all the sexual contact you want, and you're protected, because you've had the shot," Thomasson said. "It's not true."

Assemblyman Chuck DeVore, R-Irvine, said he has not yet read AB 16 but "it would seem to me that parents would want, and ought to have, a fair degree of control over this."

If AB 16 passes, the state should ensure that parents are aware of their opt-out rights and how to exercise them, DeVore said.

Assemblyman John Benoit, R-Palm Desert, said he fears AB 16 would continue a trend toward state interference in family affairs.

"I think you have to be careful about that," he said.

Dr. Mary Miller, a clinical professor and clinic medical director for UC Davis, said she believes that most doctors support HPV vaccinations.

"From a women's health preventive medicine perspective, it's a very important idea," she said.

Miller said she has seen the havoc HPV can wreak.

"If you've ever seen someone die from cervical cancer, it's a terrible, terrible way to go," she said.

GOP Assemblyman Bill Emmerson, a Redlands orthodontist, said he leans toward requiring HPV vaccinations "because the risks of cervical cancer are so great that we have to do something."

Kim Salter, president of the California National Organization for Women, applauded AB 16.

"We certainly support keeping our teenage girls safe," she said.

Both boys and girls can contract HPV, but Gardasil is approved only for girls.

Dr. Gary Rose, president of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, based in Texas, said he strongly supports teaching girls about abstinence and sexually transmitted diseases -- but HPV vaccinations can be important, too.

Even a teenage girl who practices abstinence could benefit from an HPV vaccination because she someday could be a victim of rape or abuse, or could marry a man with the virus, Rose said.

AB 16 could produce a bonanza for the manufacturer of Gardasil, Merck & Co., by expanding the market in the nation's most populous state.

Lieber said she has not spoken to Merck about her bill. Her mother, Phyllis Lieber, solicited her to propose AB 16, the lawmaker said.

"I don't think girls will become more promiscuous because of this," Phyllis Lieber said. "If they're going to be promiscuous, I think it's because of what they see on television."

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